

Esalen: Where It's At

by Michael Murphy
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ESALEN



Big Sur, once the land of Henry Miller, is again the land of Esalen, but where at one time the Esalen Indians roamed the countryside, Esalen Institute now probes the boundaries of the human potential. And we are as controversial as Miller was, because we are willing to explore *any* approach which will extend the abilities of man. Esalen refuses to subscribe to any dogma—in philosophy, in psychology, or in religion—and for our seminars and encounter groups we bring in leaders from every field to contribute their own approach to the precarious condition of being human.

A weekend seminar with B. F. Skinner, the developer of operant conditioning, will be followed by a series of workshops with a Protestant theologian, an advocate of LSD, a Carmelite monk, an existential psychotherapist, the president of the American Psychological As-

where it's at

By Michael Murphy



sociation, an historian, an authority on ESP, a Zen scholar, an architect, or a Hindu mystic. Skinner, Harvey Cox, Alan Watts, Father William McNamara, Rollo May, Abraham Maslow, Arnold Toynbee, Gardner Murphy, Shunryu Suzuki, Buckminster Fuller, and Hridayas Chaudhuri all have participated in the work of Esalen. Part of the excitement at Big Sur comes from the force of encountering the leading exponents of varied points of view.

Most of our workshops are experimental and experiential. They are conducted in an atmosphere with few institutional restrictions, where social scientists may "do their thing" and pioneer new methods of personal and interpersonal relations. Our primary concern is the affective domain—the senses and feelings, though we certainly are interested in the cognitive. We hope to educate people, if only for a weekend, in



what Aldous Huxley called the "non-verbal humanities"—long neglected in our culture because of the heavy emphasis which is placed on the verbal-rational aspect of man.

That man is capable of heightened functioning in *all* fields is proved every day. The wine tasters, the perfume smellers sharpen the senses; the skin diver, the mountain climber, the skydiver, the miler who keeps cutting seconds off his time—all push the limits of human functioning. And people in the fields of dance, the arts, and physical education are devising ways to extend the human potential.

Although most of our programs *could* be called therapies, we think of the thousands who come to Esalen not as sick people but as seekers of personal growth. They come from all walks of life, from business, universities, law offices, kitchens—and from Haight Asbury.

Esalen is, perhaps, a product of the

times. Along with the trend toward life-long education has come a rise of popular interest in the existential philosophy of the here-and-now. We find more and more Americans who want to experience the present, to contact their feelings, to communicate intimately with others. At Esalen, as at Esalen-inspired institutes like Kairos in Southern California and Shalal in Vancouver, we try to expand human consciousness and help people "turn on" without drugs or alcohol.

The experiential methods used at Esalen have been developed primarily by our associates in residence, whose techniques demand the total involvement of participants and, like the experiences of an LSD trip, are intensely personal, and extremely difficult to describe in conventional language. To me, the experience of going through the workshops and observing the approaches used at Big Sur is like reading Lawrence Durrell's *Alexandria Quartet*.

On a walk around the grounds and through our redwood buildings clustered on a bluff high above the Pacific Ocean, one might see a blindfolded person led about silently in a group leader's effort to restore the individual's sense of touch and to give the experience of dependency. Or one might watch people "converse" with their bodies and eyes, cutting through society's excessive verbalism to authentic feelings, or one might find six or eight people lying side by side in a "sandwich" or rolling over one another to sense the presence of others, and to learn it's all right to touch each other.

Married couples, whose physical relationship has become mere repetition, are resensitized to each other. Eyes shut, they pat each other's faces and open their eyes to see a different person. They are taught new ways of body massage and brought into closer contact.

Our body-awareness workshops include a series of simple procedures to increase the sensitivity, to quiet the mind, and to achieve an optimal *tonus* between being too tense and being too relaxed. To these deceptively simple procedures is added a highly sensitive system of massage at the hot natural sulphur-water baths at our Big Sur center.

Frederick Perls, the 74-year-old founder of Gestalt therapy, works with a group structure in his institutes but leads each person individually to his impasse point and, hopefully, beyond. Nothing is too small to escape examination in his groups. He pays strict atten-





tion to physical manifestations of inner conflicts, making the "patient" aware of the sound of his own voice, his breathing, and his posture.

A psychologist who also was trained by Max Reinhardt as a theatre director, Perls relies on props and on his uncanny sense of seeing a person's basic stance in the world. The props include a "hot seat" in which patients sit, a vacant chair which serves as a "screen" for the patient's projections and a focal point for his dialogue with other parts of his own body, and video-tape equipment for feedback. In a typical session, Perls may ask a patient to verbalize and to act out

a dream or fantasy, telling him to play all parts of the dream in the present tense. At one point, he may shift a dialogue between the patient and that part of his dream "sitting" in the vacant chair into a conversation between the patient's right and left hands.

Such dialogues call attention to basic polarities in the patient's personality and usually, after the patient has carried out his dialogue, bring him to the impasse point at which the dialogue ceases and he is in a panic-stricken whirl, unable to leave what Perls calls "the merry-go-round of compulsive repetition." Now the patient is stuck, unable to crack

through his self-defeating ego games. Not every person can break through his impasse, but in a Gestalt session, most do reach or approach an understanding of their own polarities.

Perls was influenced by Freud in Germany but abandoned traditional psychoanalysis in favor of his own gestalt technique many years ago. Today, his theories are similar to those of existential psychiatry, but he goes further in concentrating on sensory behavior and in declaiming the intellect as fantasy—"the rehearsal stage on which we prepare for the roles we want."

The basic theory of Gestalt therapy is that maturation is a continuous growth process in which environmental support is transformed into self-support. In healthy development, the infant mobilizes and learns to use his own resources. A neurosis develops in an environment which does not facilitate the maturation process. Development is perverted into patterns designed to control the environment by manipulation. At the core of the neurosis is an existential "impasse," a situation in which no environmental support is forthcoming, and the individual clings to the status quo, held back by a "catastrophic expectation" which prevents risk taking.

Virginia Satir, a founder of the Mental Research Institute in Palo Alto, California, conducts our family-therapy programs and workshops for couples. In her experiential sessions, she seeks four results from participants: heightened individual self-esteem; improved communication, particularly of a nonverbal nature, between couples and their children; an understanding of the couple or family as a system with a set of expectations; and a developed potential for new growth in any relationship.

A series of exercises—including "eyealogues," where feelings are expressed to another solely with the eyes—art expression, encounter methods, and role-playing are used in their workshops to achieve what Virginia Satir considers a "creative marriage." In her conjoint family therapy, for example, she may ask family members to take each other's roles and thereby experience various points of view. She urges participants toward full understanding and expression of their feelings and a resolution of the conflict between intimacy and autonomy. She puts it like this: "In every marriage there is a 'me,' a 'you,' and an 'us.' Once people fully realize this, they can

begin to think of totally new ways of self- and other-validation."

William Schutz, the director of the Group Process Section of the Albert Einstein School of Medicine before joining Esalen a couple of months ago, is a specialist in interpersonal behavior. His encounter groups cover many methods of exploring the human potential, including fantasy, body awareness, and psychodrama. In one exercise, for example, group members link arms in a circle and one person tries to break out of the ring, experiencing frustration and anger when he fails to do so. The group then may hold a person and throw him into the air to help him feel his passivity, or a pair may engage in an arm-wrestling contest. In another exercise, the members of a group lie on the floor in a circle, their heads together, to create a giant dandelion. Schutz gives them a situation, and they form a train of fantasy together. Afterwards they talk together about the fantasy and what it reveals. Schutz's goal is to amplify feelings and to help turn suspicious, hostile, or dull individuals into trusting and aware people capable of more meaningful lives.

We have grown a bit since our first tentative programs in the Fall of 1962; 4000 people come to the Institute at Big Sur every year now, and our new San Francisco center attracted 8000 people during its first three weeks of operation.

In September of last year, we began our first residential program, an attempt to combine elements of seminar programs into a unified nine months' curriculum. This Fall, 21 resident fellows—who include the curriculum expert from an Eastern state university, a Duke graduate student preparing a doctor thesis on meditation, and a theologian from a Jesuit college—began our second residential program in self-awareness under the direction of Schutz and Edward Maupin, formerly on the staff of the Neuropsychiatric Institute at UCLA.

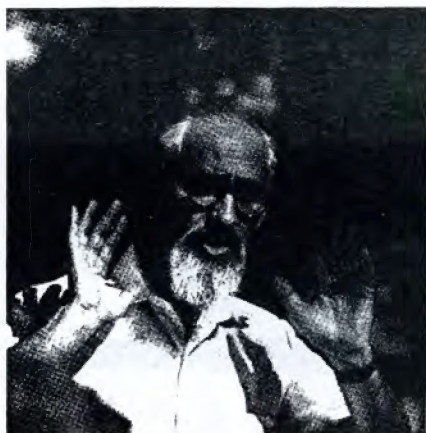
It remains to be seen whether the moments of healing and moments of illumination which occur regularly in weekend workshops can be sustained on a long-term basis.

Richard Price, co-founder of Esalen, is working with R. D. Laing of London's Tavistock Clinic on a proposal to establish a Blowout Center at Big Sur, where a small, selected group of psychotics will be treated as persons on voyages of discovery and allowed to go through their psychoses. It appears that the nonpara-



At Esalen, it's "touch and go," with quiet contemplation, exercises to quicken sensory awareness and tone the body, in addition to seminars and encounter groups.

Resident seminars and workshops are becoming increasingly popular. Philosopher Abraham Kaplan (below), conducts a five-day intense-encounter workshop at Kairos, a new, Esalen-like center at Rancho Santa Fe, California.





doing, and some might agree with Abraham M. Maslow, who called Esalen "in *potential*, the most important educational institution in the world," many others consider us little more than kooks and cultists.

There are risks in an organization like Esalen, but we prefer risks to the status quo. Some of our approaches will hold up with passage of time; others will be discarded as foolish or useless. But no approach is too far out to be tried here. We intend to be on the cutting edge.



noid, acute schizophrenic break is relatively short and is followed by a re-integrative process, so that the individual returns from his "trip" with a higher IQ than at the beginning. We hope to find new ways to make such breaks valuable, function-heightening experiences.

It is hard for us at Esalen to assess our impact on the scientific community. We are aware that Esalen is controversial. While many people respect what we are



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Biography

Mike Murphy ("Esalen, Where It's At," page 34) president of the Esalen Institute, is a spry 37. Torn between his fascination with contemplative philosophy and Eastern meditation, and his real promoter's talent, he has combined the two interests dramatically at the unique, controversial, and catalytic Esalen Institute at Big Sur, California.

Murphy did graduate work in philosophy and served his time in the Army. Then he went to an Ashram in India and studied meditation for a year-and-a-half.

Back in California he worked for three years as a two-day-a-week bellhop in Palo Alto, and spent the rest of his time (about six to eight hours a day) in meditation.

Then, in 1961, he and his brother, Dennis (film writer and author of the novel, *The Sergeant*), inherited 150 acres of the marvelous coastal land just south of colorful Carmel, Califor-



nia — a mile-long strip complete with hot springs, cyprus trees, cabins, and a lodge, just perfect for seminars. "Dick Price, who was a classmate at Stanford, and I were down at Big Sur wondering what I should do with the land, and meditating," Murphy recalls. "Suddenly we both said: 'Let's start a center.' The following Fall, in 1962, we began our programs at Esalen. I honestly believe that my partner, Dick, and I came along at just the right time so that Esalen has become a real force in psychology as science seeks to understand the limits of the human potential."